



# Foster care agency seeks money to meet mandates

Emily Wagster Pettus, Associated Press Published 4:01 p.m. CT March 18, 2018



(Photo: Rogelio V. Solis/AP)

Mississippi legislators are approaching the final phase of patching holes in the current year's state budget and writing a \$6 billion spending plan for fiscal 2019, which begins July 1.

Budget writers face deadlines in late March, and the Department of Child Protection Services is among the agencies requesting more money for this year and next.

The agency is trying to fulfill a federal court order to improve Mississippi's long-troubled foster care system, and Jess Dickinson inherited financial problems when he became its director (</story/news/politics/2017/08/08/bryant-appointing-justice-dickinson-child-services-chandler-retirement/550398001/>) in mid-September. Like his predecessor, David Chandler, Dickinson served as a Mississippi Supreme Court justice before Gov. Phil Bryant moved him over to lead the child welfare agency.

Dickinson told The Associated Press last week that he's not assigning blame for the budget deficit that existed when he started the job.

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Human Services has subsidized the Child Protection Services' budget by using state money to bring in federal money — a "matching" program that's available to Human Services but could not be used by Child Protection Services as a stand-alone agency.

Dickinson told lawmakers months ago that Child Protection Services was facing a \$50 million shortfall for the current year. The agency saved money by cutting some contracts. And Human Services was again able to use federal matching money to help out. Those changes reduced the current year's shortfall to \$12 million, and Dickinson is asking legislators to provide that money.

The Joint Legislative Budget Committee recommends that the state spend just under \$98 million on Child Protection Services in fiscal 2019. That's the same amount originally budgeted for the current year. However, Dickinson said to meet federal court requirements, the agency needs \$133 million for the coming year.

It could be a difficult request to fulfill because money is tight.

Mississippi had 5,538 children in foster care Thursday, with 1,457 of them — about 26 percent — coming from the coastal counties of Harrison, Jackson and Hancock. Dickinson said drug traffic along the Gulf Coast likely accounts for some child abuse. He said abuse cases also increased after the 2010 oil spill, when people lost jobs.

A 2004 federal lawsuit filed against Mississippi said children had suffered abuse because of shoddy work in the foster care system. Republican Bryant has often said since becoming governor in 2012 that improving foster care is one of his main goals.

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Marcia Lowry is an attorney and executive director of A Better Childhood, a group based in Chappaqua, New York, that is among those suing the state. She said in a March 5 letter to state attorneys that she intends to ask a judge to find the state is out of compliance with a court order.

The court order required Child Protection Services to have at least 50 percent of its workers in compliance with a certain level of caseloads by Sept. 30. Dickinson said the agency met that level. But the requirement increased to 90 percent of workers being in compliance by Dec. 31, and he acknowledged that the agency does not meet the higher level.

"Given our current funding level, we have kind of reached a plateau. This is, really and truly, absent some appropriate funding for this agency, we are doing about the best we can do," Dickinson said Thursday. "I don't have enough caseworkers. I don't have enough supervisors. I don't have enough resources to do it, given the money."

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